

# [Theatre essay: site specific performance](https://assignbuster.com/theatre-essay-site-specific-performance/)

## Site Specific Performance: How has the nature of site-specific performance as a hybrid art-form influenced approaches tosite-specific work in Britain over the last decade?

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Site-specific performance emerged out of the radicalartistic milieu of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s that also gave birth tosite-specific work generally. It represents perhaps the most ambitious andrevolutionary re-interpretation of theatre and performance devised in thetwenty-first century. Site-specific performance has influenced site-specificwork in Britain in the past ten years in many ways. This dissertation examinesthree especially strong influences: (1) site-specific performance and its useof audience (2) site-specific performance and its internal debate as to whethersite-specific art is site-exclusive or site generic, and (3) site-specific practitioners’theory of the selection of sites. Before these three principal investigations arediscussed the dissertation briefly reviews the history and origins ofsite-specific performance and its key practitioners.

The first major section of this dissertation investigatesand analyses the relationship between site-specific performance and itsaudience. The questions and debates that have arisen from the novel andintimate participation between site-specific performers and their audienceshave had considerable influence upon site-specific work as a whole. Site-specificperformance understands the audience as a vital element of the total productionand not merely as paying members of the public who are isolated from thecreative process. Many performances depend intimately upon the energy andmutual fascination of the subject that exists between performers and audience. Often the audience are part of the performance itself. This intimacy points toa basic philosophical and professional principle of site-specific performancethat reacts against the perceived coldness, frigidity and eliteness oftraditional theatre buildings and instead maintains that theatre andperformance ought to be a socially-levelling enterprise. The dissertation thereforeasks the prominent questions: Can audience self-identity be altered by aperformance? And: Can original and multiple spectator identities be created bysite-specific performances? The answers to these questions have beeninfluential throughout the whole of the site-specific world.

The second-subsection of this section explores therelationship between site-specific performance and the community from which itsaudience is drawn. The success of site-specific performance theorists andpractitioners in showing the great extent to which the community in which aperformance is situated affects the ambiance and attitude of the audienceechoes throughout the site-specific world and informs it of vital lessons. Thisinvestigation of community and audience also highlights how site-specific performancecan work to bring theatre to the masses in an inclusive format that protestsagainst the elitist forms of the past. The final sub-section of this sectionreviews some of the problems – variability and limitations of audience forinstance experienced by site-specific performers with respect to audienceand then suggests how these may teach valuable lessons to the rest of thesite-specific world.

The second major section of the dissertation examines thekey debate in the literature of site-specific performance as to whether suchperformances should be site-specific or site-generic. That is, whether suchperformances should be free to tour and travel or not? The answers anddiscoveries furnished for this question by site-specific performers arerelevant and influential upon this same debate which penetrates the whole ofthe site-specific community. This debate reaches to the philosophical centre ofsite-specific performance and threatens to bring about a fundamental changewithin the genre. At the heart of the issue is the question of whether aparticular performance, conditioned as it is by the particular environment inwhich it is created, can be moved either physically or spiritually to anothersite. Vehement arguments have been made on both sides of the debate, with manypro-tour performers refuting Richard Serra’s famous dictum that ‘ to removethe work is to destroy it ‘. The dissertation considers as one solution the theoretical postulate of a’pure’ model of site-specific performance from which various performancesdeviate in healthily diverse ways. The dissertation then considers in depth theproposal of Wrights & Sites whether that the solution to this dilemma mightdepend upon a change in terminology and vocabulary of site-specificperformance. Such a shift of terminology provides site-specific performancewith a greater subtlety of definition and self-identity and therefore overcomesthe apparent impasse suggested by the site-specific site-generic dispute.

The final major sub-section of the dissertation considersthe ‘ use of space’ by recent site-specific performers and the influences ofthis use upon site-specific work as a whole. The ‘ space’ within which atheatrical performance may take place was given its most radical revision andprogressive drive in the twentieth- century by the practitioners ofsite-specific performance. ‘ Space’, in terms of performance, had before theadvent of site-specific theatre been confined near exclusively to traditionaltheatre buildings and to their conventional shapes. The outstanding achievementof site-specific performance has been to vastly extend the range and types of spaceand venue in which a theatrical performance can take place. The dissertationconsiders the implications for performance of such a radical break with thepast, as well as looking at the notions of ‘ uninhabitable space’ and ‘ culturalspace’. The discoveries made about ‘ space’ by site-specific performers arerelevant for the whole of site-specific work in Britain.

The dissertation concludes with an evaluation and summing-upof all the previous discussion and with an analysis of the future influence ofsite-specific performance upon site-specific work as a whole.

SECTION 2: SITE-SPECIFICPERFORMANCE HISTORY

It is important to know something of the history ofsite-specific performance when seeking to determine its influence uponsite-specific work in the past decade in Britain. Such a glance at the historyilluminates the evolution of ideas within the genre and shows how they came totake their present form in the twenty-first century.

Site-specific performance originated as an outgrowth ofsite-specific artwork movement that began in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. Site-specific artwork was a form of art that was created to exist in a certainspace and was conditioned in form by the environment and space of that place. At the centre of the site-specific artwork movement was an attempt to take artout of what was perceived to be the affected and pretentious atmospheres of thegalleries and theatre buildings and to transpose them upon a wider variety ofoutdoor and indoor venues. One useful definition of site-specific performanceis that of the Dictionary of Video Art which states ‘ Locations andenvironments may have some kind of drama or meaning for ordinary people butthis has no significance for the bourgeoisie until interpreted by theheightened sensibilities of the director ‘. In other words, the purpose of site-specific performance and its reason forexistence is to make the public aware of the artistic merits of ordinarybuildings and spaces that have always been of interest to ordinary men butpassed over by the elitist and institutionalised artists of the past. Site-specificperformance often ‘ involves a (more or less) political decision to workagainst the dominant discourse of London, its theatre buildings, and itstheatre tradition ‘. Site-specific performance is about a fundamental reorientation of space awayfrom its traditional understanding in British theatre.

Site-specific performance has emerged out of this generalartistic milieu in the works of artists and directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Deborah Warner, Gof Brith, Janet Cardiff and in festivals orproduction companies such as Grid Iron, Wrights & Sites and the EdinburghFestival. Other recent practitioners include Mac Wellman, Meredith Monk andAnne Hamburger. From the first list two names in particular have been pivotalto the development of site-specific theatre: Peter Brook and Deborah Warner. PeterBrook was one of Britain’s greatest theatre directors and much of thisgreatness came from his radical style and use of stage – both of which are seenas pre-cursors of modern site-specific performance. Brook was deeply influencedby the Theatre of Cruelty by Antonin Artaud and this lead to dramaticproductions such as Jean Genet’s The Screens in 1964 and Peter Weiss’s Marat/Sade in 1964 – a huge success after its sharp and revolutionary break withtheatre style to that time. Brook brought a new philosophy to the theatre thatimbued it with a new sense of potential and manipulation of space andenvironment – shown well in his productions of Seneca’s Oedipus and TheEmpty Space. More recently, Deborah Warner has made further developed theseearly origins of site-specific performance with radically different productionssuch as Titus Andronicus (1987), Richard II (1995) and JuliusCaesar (2005).

SECTION 3: SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE: AUDIENCE

(A) Audience: General

Perhaps the singlegreatest contribution of site-specific performance as a hybrid art-form tosite-specific work as a whole has been the radical transformation andre-constitution of the concept of audience and of how audiences experience liveperformance. When site-specific art first emerged in the late 1960’s it appealedto audiences primarily because of the novelty of the form and the novelty ofthe viewing experience. Nonetheless, site-specific art, whilst novel in itself, did not go make any profoundly novel contributions to the nature, identity andconstitution of its audiences. Site-specific work had no yet developed asite-specific critique or paradigm, and this was left in large measure to thepioneers of site-specific performance. The great advantage and breakthroughachieved by modern site-specific performance is that it draws the audience ofinto an intimate participation with that performance; the audience become anessential part of the performance itself. Notable historical examples haveincluded Siren’s Crossing’s Trace and Flight (2000), Wrights & Sites The Quay Thing (1998), Anne Marie Culhane’s Night Sky (1997) and TheWhalley Range All Stars’ Day of the Dummy (1999).

Consequently, withsite-specific performance, both performers and spectators reach a profounderdepth of empathy and understanding with the performance that they havewitnessed, than with traditional theatre and even from site-specific work as awhole. In this sense, site-specific performance represents an evolution of thegeneral site-specific art-form towards a level of greater spectator-involvementand identity. The philosophy and theory that underpins this evolution has much to do with areaction against the perceived coldness and unnaturalness of the traditionaltheatre (where the audience are always separated from the performers) and itstendency to promote the values and aims of elite members of society above theaspirations of the ordinary citizen. Site-specific performance however can besaid to be an ‘ equalizing art-form’: it holds as a basic philosophicalprinciple the belief that the members of the audience are of equal importanceand significance for the meaning and successful execution of a particularperformance as the performers themselves. As such, site-specific theatre andperformance have taught and continue to teach practitioners of site-specificwork generally – be it site-specific conceptual art, community art, installation art, public art etc., that the greater the participation andsense of involvement of the audience, the greater will be the efficacy of thatperformance upon both performer and viewer. Site-specific work therefore hasmuch to learn from the techniques, literary interpretations, scene-designs andso on of site-specific performers.

This use of audienceby site-specific performers has achieved for the first time, according to FionaWilkie, ‘ the sense of a collective audience identity, a knowing audiencethat constructs itself appropriately as an interpretative body via a cumulativeframework of contemporary framework experiences ‘. Thus, site-specific performance asks of the audience members themselves certainbasic existential and artistic questions. For instance: how is an audience’ssense of self forged? How and in what ways is an audience’s purpose decided? The extent to which site-specific performance achieves this intensive audienceself-interrogation is perhaps unrivalled in all twentieth-century performance art-formsand promises to be one of the few genuinely unique artistic discoveries ofrecent years.

Traditional theatremaintains a clear space between audience and performer no matter how elatedor ecstatic a spectator may feel during a traditional performance he is alwaysnonetheless still a mere spectator with no direct influence upon the directionor outcome of the performance. Site-specific performance radically reverses theaudience situation and role and instead makes them central actors in theperformance itself. Site-specific performance also raises the questions of: Canaudience self-identity be altered by a performance? And: Can original andmultiple spectator identities be created by site-specific performances? On the first question it is noted by authors such as Williams and Kwon that theunique process of audience participation in site-specific performance oftenleaves the audience with changed perceptions of identity once the performanceis completed. On the second question, it is also clear from the growingliterature that now surrounds site-specific performance that the form has thepotential to create new audience identities as well as to leave differentgroups of the audience with different identity perceptions at the end. From these various observations of audience participation in site-specificperformance it is evident that site-specific work has benefited and learnt anenormous amount about the role of audience and its possible stages oftransformation. Moreover, the far more diverse nature of members ofsite-specific performances alters the mood and atmosphere and perceptions ofthat audience. Rather than being an elite experience attended by only one classof people with, broadly speaking, a single artistic attitude and expectation, the audience is instead a diverse melting-pot of different classes andprofessions of people.

(B) Audience & Community

Site-specificperformance has also raised for general site-specific art the notion of theimportance of the community in which a particular performance or art exhibittakes place. One particular site-specific performance company, The Olimpias , base their work upon questions of site ownership and in line with the theme ofdisability. According to Petra Kuppers, company director, site-specificperformance ought to be ‘ attentive to the local community and its ways of inhabitingits environment the company (The Olimpias) work with the community to takenew forms of site, re-interpret the site, keep its history and presence alive ‘.’Community’ then is a crucial extension of the audience and the site factorsinvolved in a site-specific performance. It is the community about a specificwork that is most intimately affected by a performance since that performancethrows new light on and reinterprets that community’s existence in a particularway. Site-specific performance can help to re-invigorate and breathe life intoa community by making it more aware and perceptive of the sites that itoccupies. So too the site-specific performances of Wrights & Sitesis ‘ interested in the place and in the people who meet us in this place’. Thecompany Welfare State International have also expressed a ‘ commitment todrawing in local energies and leaving behind a residue of skills and confidenceafter the company’s withdrawal’ . For many companies then site-specific theatre is a performance that takes placein the living space of a particular community and is enacted alongside andwithin the working life of the community. Thus there is an experientialauthenticity that is unique to site-specific theatre.

(C) Issues WithAudience

Nonetheless, somewriters such as Jan Cohen-Cruzhave argued that taking theatre from established buildings in specific placesto a specific-site does not necessarily create a more intimate audienceenvironment or sense of identity or multiple identities. On this Cohen-Cruzstates: ‘ Space is always controlled by someone and exists somewhere, so itis inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessibleto everyone. one must question whether access to a broader audience really isa difference between performance site-specific and in theatre buildings. ‘ Cohen-Cruz’s quotation is useful because it sounds a note of caution tosite-specific performers who automatically assume that by merely creatingsite-specific performance of any sort they will immediately achieve a deeper ormore profound sense of audience participation and diversity than would be foundin a traditional theatre. Site-specific performance is a relatively newart-form that is treading into new territory – especially with respect to theunderstanding of audience participation and identity. It is therefore to beexpected that a certain exuberance and robust enthusiasm amongst its performersmay sometimes lead to idealizations of the potential of the art-form; that is, a tendency to assume that site-specific performance is a panacea for all limitationsexperienced by traditional-theatre audiences in past centuries.

It is prudenttherefore to agree with writers such as Fiona Wilkie that the potentialaudience range and diversity of a site-specific performance is decided not byonly by the nature of the genre itself but by the particular features of thesite itself. Access to such site-specific performances depends nearly entirelyupon the location and type of site chosen for a particular performance. If, for instance, the site chosen for a particular performance is an abandonedwarehouse or factory floor close to several housing estates or residentialareas then it is likely that that performance will be accessible to many peoplewho would be traditionally excluded from a theatre experience. If, however, asite-specific performance is held in a country-estate or at the top of acommercial tower-block then it is far less likely that the audience thatattends will be as diverse and kaleidoscopic as at the performance of in theabandoned factory or warehouse. For instance, the site-specific performancecompany Kneehigh Theatrehave reflected how their performance of Hell’s Mouth in the ClayDistrict of Cornwall – a poor and dilapidated area – encouraged a far broadersection of the community to attend than would have done the traditionaltheatre. In Kneehigh’s words: ‘ In Hell’s Mouth last summer, bikers from thearea performed the English/Cornish skirmishes in the Mad Max style Cornwall ofthe future. This theme … and reasonable ticket prices, encouraged a stronglocal percentage of audience, who would not normally see the company’s work ortheatre of any sort ‘. So too the breadth of the audience of any site-specific work will be determinedalso by the theme and nature of the performance. A site-specific performancethat deals with an esoteric or abstruse subject will not guarantee for itself abroad audience simply by virtue of the fact that it is a site-specific performance.

Several site-specificperformance companies have sought to maintain the diversity of their audiencesin the following ways. The Lion’s Part company, for instance, seek to ‘ escapethe bureaucracy of the theatre building ‘ by providing free access to all performances and free financially also. InFiona Wilkie’s eloquent phrase:

‘ The notion of the performance moves away from thehigh-brow associations of the theatre and closer to reaching a publicwell-versed in the popular culture of gigs, festivals and celebrations. Itemphasizes the significance of the spatial encounter and is conceived as awhole experience for the spectator ‘

Wilkie here identifiesa key strength of site-specific performance: its ability and capacity tosynthesize myriad different forms of contemporary art, culture and society andto fuse them into a relevant and meaningful whole. Moreover, site-specificperformance has the unique advantage of being able to manipulate space inwhatever way it likes. A traditional theatre is severely limited in the sensethat its performance can only take place within the predetermined and setdimensions of the theatre building; these dimensions remain the same for everynew production no matter how different such productions might be from eachother. The space and dimensions of a site-specific performance are howeverdetermined and limited only by the space and dimensions of the site itself andthey therefore have a far greater range and flexibility than traditionaltheatre. For instance: a windmill, an abandoned factory, a coffee shop, adoctor’s surgery, a former nuclear silo all offer different and uniqueexperiences of space for the audience. So too, a site-specific performance mayeven have two separate audiences: one that pays admission and is conscious ofthe performance and another that attends the event for free and is an integralpart of the performance itself. To take an example: when Grid Iron held thesite-specific performance Decky Does a Bronco in numerous children’s playgrounds some audience members bought tickets whilstthe children (attending free) that played in the playground were urged tocontinue their activities and so became part of the setting and the performanceitself. Ben Harrison, director of Decky Does a Bronco , recalls howchildren came to and fro different parts of the performance depending upon thelevel of excitement raised for them by a particular moment or scene from thatperformance; when bored the children would retire to the quieter parts of thepark. In Harrison’s useful phrase, this double audience ‘ adds to thecomplexity of the event ‘.

SECTION 4: SITE-SPECIFICPERFORMANCE: ‘ SITE-SPECIFIC ORSITE-GENERIC?’

Site-specificperformance has contributed significantly to the site-specific as a whole onthe pressing question of whether site specific art should be site-specific or sitegeneric. That is, whether site-specific work should remain rooted in at theexact site of its creation or whether the idea created in a particular site maybe transferred to other similar sites. This question is perhaps the mostvociferously argued debate in site-specific work at present. At stake is thephilosophical and intellectual basis of the movement itself. Site-specific workemerged in the late 1960’s as an art-form that made a unique use of site andsite features to influence the shape and form of the design: these sites wereusually highly different or unique from all others and so each sculpture, art-work or performance had its own unique characteristics. Traditionalsite-specific artists of this old-school therefore refute the idea that theidiosyncratic features of a particular site can simply be uprooted andtransferred to another site – no matter how similar to the original. In RichardSerra’s famous phrase ‘ to remove the work is to destroy the work’ . In other words: once a site-specific art-piece has been torn from its originalcontext it loses the one thing that made it powerful and unique. Nonetheless, in recent decades such notions of the immovability from and inseparability of asite-specific work from its original setting have been assailed by artistsdriven by market forces and institutional changes in attitude. In one criticswords: ‘ Site specificity has become a complex cipher of unstablerelationships between locations an identities in the era of late capitalism. ‘ Miwon Kwon’s work One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and LocationIdentity is of enormous importance in elucidating the contours and features of thisshift in the direction of site-specific art.

The internal movementsof site-specific performance have done much to inform and influence the widersite-specific art of the last decade. In site-specific performance the keyquestion of recent years has been: Can site-specific performance travel? Or: Does ‘ Site-specificity’ mean ‘ site-exclusivity? Within the site-specificperformance community this debate as to exclusivity of site has been arguedwith near equal tenacity by both opponents and supporters. Thus, in many ways, the debate appeared recently to have come to a standstill. One way found by site-specificperformers to step beyond this impasse has been to define levels ofsite-specificity. For instance the company Red Earthhas stated:

‘ Someprojects are completely site-specific, i. e., they could not take place anywhereelse without losing a strong thread of meaning and connection; while other moreflexible projects may work around a certain sense of place, i. e., the spirit orconcept at the heart of the project would work in several – but not all -locations’.

This quotation then suggests that the term ‘ site-specific’has a degree of inherent relativity and flexibility. At one end of thespectrum, the term stands for certain performances that are absolutely rootedin the exact and unique site and community features in which they are set; forsuch performances there is no possibility of moving their ideas to differentsites. At the other end of the spectrum, certain performances can be moved fromsite to site if they preserve or enhance the ‘ spirit’ or primary idea thatbegan the original performance. Between these two poles are various types ofsite-specific performance whose transferability rests upon ambiguous or dubiousprinciples. Justin McKeown of the Whalley Range All Stars suggests that thisrelativity should be defined in terms of site-specific performances that are ‘ directlyderived from a chosen site ‘ and therefore have to remain at that site indefinitely, and on the other handbetween performances that can be transferred since they acknowledge and expandupon ‘ the inherent meanings within a site ‘. Paul Pinson, of Boilerhouse, has argued further that the relativity of site-specific performance isconditioned by the way that the company engages with the space that it occupiesat a particular site. Pinson suggests further that a performance can bepartially site-specific and partially of another genre and that this hybridity thereforejustifies a company to tour its performances. Pinson states: ‘ You canrecreate a work in response to a number of different sites, which is totallyvalid in itself and is an element of site-specificity but is different frommaking a piece of work in response to one specific site.’

The site-specific or site-generic debate and is plethora ofinterpretations have raised questions about the present ‘ purity’ ofsite-specific performance. Above all: is it possible for theoreticians andpractitioners of site-specific performance to find or derive a ‘ pure’ model ofsite-specific performance, against which hybrid forms of this model might becompared? That is: can one set up construct an ideal paradigm of site-specificperformance and then show how variations of this paradigm are beneficial intheir individual ways? Miwon Kwon has suggested that one definition of thispure model might be ‘ To make a truly site-specific piece means it sitswholly in that site in both its content and form, otherwise if moveable, itbecomes more about the site as a vehicle. ‘ Variations from this pure model are healthy natural growths from themother-model; the work of site-specific theoreticians is to define thesevariations and to ascribe to each of them independent areas of operation.

An alternative to this model of deriving variations ofsite-specific art from a pure or perfect model is to invent a new terminologyfor the art-form. Wrights & Siteshave suggested that the terms ‘ In theatre building ‘, ‘ Outside theatre ‘,’ Site-Sympathetic ‘, ‘ Site-Generic ‘ and ‘ Site-Specific ‘ beused to describe the various degrees of theatre performance. The first two ofthese are clearly beyond the pale of any generally accepted definition ofsite-specific performance. Interestingly however Wrights & Sites propose athree-fold division of the genre of site-specific performance. The advantage ofsuch a hierarchy is that it allows greater freedom and subtlety of descriptionwhen deciding to which exact genre a performance of site-specific work belongs. The term ‘ site-specific’ is accordingly reserved for performances that have aprofound and absolute relationship with the specific site in which theperformance is prepared and enacted. Such performances work only at one site, never tour or travel, and do not use pre-existing props or scripts. Nonetheless, one major problem of such a terminology is the difficulty ofassigning the large number of performances that seem to fall between thecategories of ‘ site-generic’ and ‘ site-specific’.

These disputes about definitions and terminology that havearisen in the particular field of site-specific performance are or considerablerelevance and have been of considerable influence upon similar disputes insite-specific work generally. The central question of the debate – cansite-specific performance tour – is equally relevant to all others types ofsite-specific work, be it sculpture, community art, painting and so on. Byadopting a similar terminology to that of site-specific performancesite-specific work generally might clear up many of its own internal disputes.

SECTION 5: SITE-SPECIFIC: TYPES OF SITE

Internal debates within the literature of site-specificperformance as to what kind of site to select for its performances hashad considerable influence over similar decisions within site-specific workgenerally.

What then can site-specific work generally learn fromsite-specific performance? Above all, perhaps, is the extensive andcomprehensive analysis and exploration of the medium of space undertaken byleading site-specific performers. Richard Schechnerhas stated that ‘ theatre places are maps of the cultures where they exist ‘ and Hetheringtonthat ‘ Certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity’. Artisticmanipulation of space is vital to successful site-specific performance, and theunique development in this quest has been the exploration of alternatives typesof space and site in which to perform site-specific theatre. Theatre had forcenturies been largely confined to theatre buildings of one sort or another; the advent of site-specific theatre saw the use of a plethora of differentvenues for performance from coal mines, to hospital wards, to libraries, tocoffee shops and so on ad infinitum . These ventures into alternativesites for performance raised amongst scholars of site-specific performance thekey questions: What are the consequences of such diverse selection of sites? What association will each site bring to the site-specific genre? What are thecommon themes that bind such eclectic choices of venue? On the last question, some attempts have been made by figures such as Hetheringtonto classify these venues in groups: for instance, parks and children’s playareas can be classed with beaches as ‘ public spaces’. Cohen-Cruzhas argued that such spaces allow site-specific performers to use space that isnormally thought of as ‘ publicly inhabitable’ to entice passers-by to attendthe performance therefore symbolising for the performers the theme of ‘ makingperformance accessible’. The spaces found in venues such as museums, churchesand galleries are used somewhat differently however. In contrast to ‘ p